“Why is that robot following me?” Older participants’ perspectives of co-designing digital technology

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Published in:
Gerontechnology

DOI:
10.4017/gt.2020.19.s.69734.2

Publication date:
2020

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Mannheim et al. (2020). Gerontechnology 19(suppl); https://doi.org/10.4017/gt.2020.19.s.69734.2

Background Co-designing digital technologies (DT) with the end users has become a prerequisite for good practice. However, older adults are often excluded from the design process (Mannheim et al., 2019). Such exclusion may be considered as ageism (McDonough, 2016). Furthermore, it can lead to designing DTs that do not meet older adults' actual wants and needs (Neven, 2010). Therefore, this can potentially hamper the acceptance of the final product. How to bring the unique voice of older adults (van Boekel, Wouters, Grimberg, van der Meer & Luijkx, 2019) and co-design DT in an inclusive and non-ageist manner is thus a research area of importance. **Methods** Three focus groups were conducted with 21 participants (5-9 in each group), mean age 69.53 (s.d. 5.7), 57% female. Participants were part of a group of older adults who participated in co-designing various DTs, in a technological organization that gives a platform to design and try out new DTs in a living lab setting. Participants were asked about their experience in the co-design sessions, the interaction with the designers and their general experience and attitudes about using DT. **Results and Discussion** Participants reported positive and less positive experiences. Positive co-designing (e.g., of a social app) was described as an inclusive process that involved the older adults from the idea phase of the design onward and was an ongoing process. Participants indicated that their feedback was respected and incorporated in consecutive sessions. Participants felt ownership and felt like "partners" in developing the DT. Less positive co-designing (e.g., of an assistive robot), was described as a single session, with a confusing and uncertain setting and in a late stage of the design process. Participants felt they had not received sufficient instructions, combined with specific features of the product (e.g., the robot followed them around the room), made them feel insecure and "old". Most of the participants (63%) had an academic background and were highly engaged with technology or science in their previous occupation. Most identified themselves as independent in their daily life, and indicated a challenge and shortcoming of reaching and representing less independent people in the co-design sessions. This study demonstrated the importance of inclusion of older adults in the design process. Albeit, inclusion alone is not enough. Considering the stage of the design process, setting, attitudes, respect and incorporating feedback are important variables for ageist-free design that may also result in better design and higher acceptability of DT. Also highlighted is the importance of involving older adults from various backgrounds and functional levels.

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Keywords: co-design, digital technology, older adults, inclusion, focus group
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